The Language of the New Testament

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of selection. Here, the early church withstood both the
temptation to a reduction (Marcion, Tatian) and the
danger of an inflation (Gnosticism) of its definitive
texts. With the canon of 27 texts, the church retained a
plurality, without making pluralism its program.

lige Schrift?,” in *idem, Kleine Schriften II*, ed. K. Aland, TU 68, 1958 (= 1907), 15–98 • J. Leipoldt, *Geschichte des neu-

3. The language of the New Testament. Scholars have taken two main positions in their evaluation of the lan-
guage of the NT. Either this is seen as part of the de-
velopment of written Greek from → Alexander the Great
until the 1st century CE (Deissmann, Moulton, Wil-
strand, Rydbeck, Horsley), or else the language of the
NT is unique and must be considered an independent
phenomenon outside and alongside the usual develop-
ment of the Greek language (Wellhausen: a semiticizing
Greek; Turner: a special form of Christian Greek, an
ad hoc language inspired by the Holy Spirit).

In order to speak appropriately of the language of the
NT, one must first say something about the 3000-year
history of Greek. In this history, the so-called classical
Attic prose (c. 400 BCE) is a late phenomenon; but it was
this uniform Attic that was adopted by the rising super-
power to the north, Macedonia, as the diplomatic lan-
guage it employed in its dealings with the Greeks. This
universal Attic was spread throughout the entire Near
East thanks to the conquering expeditions of Alexander
the Great, and Attic became the common language of
the Hellenistic world, known as η κοινή διάλεκτος (or κοινή διάλεκτος) (or koiné for short); this expression is
found in a text by the Epicurean philosopher Colotes
(born c. 325 BCE). – From 50 BCE, the epoch of Hel-
lenistic Greek was increasingly replaced by the reaction
of the pseudo-classical movement in language and style,
which demanded a return to the authors of the classical
period (“classicism” or “Atticism”). The consequence of
this classicistic linguistic reaction was that most of the
literature of the last three centuries BCE was forgotten,
and has not survived. Thanks to the interest of Chris-
tians in the LXX, however, the most extensive text of
the Hellenistic age was preserved. Together with the
historians Polybius and Diodorus, the LXX is the most
important monument of literary κοινή, just as the NT is
without doubt the most important example of a literary
κοινή from the 1st century CE which is as yet untouched
by classicism. From the 2nd century CE onward, Artic-
cism dominates both the pagan linguistic development
and the Greek of the first Christian theologians.

The scholarly investigation of κοινή has attempted
to take into account not only the written language (lit-
ery κοινή), but also the daily spoken language, which
increasingly deviated from literary κοινή towards the end
of the 1st century BCE. Until the 19th century, the only
point of comparison with the NT was writers whose
works had survived in manuscripts. Then inscriptions
began to be used as comparative material, as were the
papyri, discovered towards the end of the century. It was
Deissmann’s achievement to have removed the NT from
its linguistic isolation and demonstrated by means of
the papyri that the phonology, flections, and lexicon of
the NT belonged to the linguistic development of its age.
Deissmann’s preference for the “demotic language” in
the NT and the papyri is due to ideas about the “people”
which were common currency in his period. He saw the
NT as the great “people’s book,” written by the people,
for the people, and in the language of the people. It later
became clear first, how difficult it is to identify the lan-
guage spoken by the uneducated people, and secondly,
that the papyri must be interpreted as representatives
of the standard κοινή, not of the Greek vulgar tongue,
which remained (and remains) an unknown quantity.
Thirdly, scholars recognized the high degree of uniform-
ity in κοινή as early as 100 BCE, seen for instance in the
agreement between Polybius and the Greek epigraphic
material. This uniformity in written Greek is, up to the
present day, perhaps the most striking characteristic
in the history of the Greek language.

Wilamowitz-Moellendorff suggested that the panhel-
lenic written language based on Attic, which developed
in the aftermath of Alexander, was roughly compara-
table to the “Hochdeutsch” of the first half of the 20th
century. After Augustus, a classicizing variant of literary
κοινή developed, which turned the clocks of the lan-
guage 400 years back. In the imperial age, the Christian
church preserved this artificial Atticizing language; thus,
the linguistic ambitions of the church were clearly differ-
ent from the language which it found in its NT. Scholars
in recent decades have spoken of different variants of
literary κοινή or else, following modern Anglo-American
linguistics, of “registers” or of a phenomenon of “poly-
glossia” (Blomqvist: synagogue translation-Greek, descriptive prose texts, paratactic-epistolary koine, etc.).

There may be a kind of intermediary layer between the Hellenistic literary koiné which we find in Polybius and the genuine classicistic prose of the imperial age (Rydbeck), with agreements between the NT and this potential intermediary prose which (like the NT) remained untouched by classicism. As already indicated, the Greek of the papyri does not correspond to demotic everyday language: to a very large extent, it corresponds precisely to the Ἱερσόν or the written language. This is why we can ascribe the Greek of the NT to this layer of prose, although spoken Greek does occasionally emerge in Mark.

Neither the Hellenistic literary koiné nor the artificial Atticistic language of the imperial age is a monolithic entity. Both contain a variety of levels of literary koiné or of high Atticistic prose, and in many cases we see the personal variants of individual writers. The NT was written before the Atticizing linguistic reaction had won the day on a broad front. Atticism must be understood as a reactionary linguistic and cultural movement; the Hellenistic koiné was born of a conservative linguistic and cultural climate which did indeed build on Attic prose, but allowed the individual writer a relatively wide freedom of movement. This is the explanation of the various examples of literary koiné which have left their mark on NT Greek: the various translation strata of the LXX, and the representatives of the so-called intertestamental language, especially 1 → Enoch and the → Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, which influence the Greek in James, the letters of Peter, and Hebrew.

Many influences flow into the NT. The Greek of the LXX is particularly important for the linguistic forms of the synoptics and Acts; for these writers, the LXX is the classic edifying text which they quote and freely integrate into their literary composition. It is here that the root of Luke’s classicism lies, not in the pagan classicism of the imperial age (cf. Wifstrand, Lukas, arguing against Norden). At least five linguistic styles can be distinguished in the NT, which have the same basis in relation to phonology, inflections, syntax (with the exception of passages which imitate the translation-syntax of the LXX), the formation of words, and the meanings of words: viz., the customary literary koiné which goes back to the Hellenistic period. Group I: Paul. Group II: John (and the letters of John). In linguistic and stylistic terms, Paul and John are two unique individuals. Group III: the synoptic Gospels and Acts, a group characterized by a septuagintal atmosphere and general semitic influences on phraseology and the sequence of words. Group IV: Revelation, where the author is a stylist with a mind of his own, who deliberately deviates from normal Greek grammar. Group V: the Catholic Epistles, Hebrews, and the Pastoral Letters. This group is distinct from the other groups in two ways (cf. Wifstrand, Stylistic Problems): first, their authors favor the customary Greek style of descriptive, analytical, and paratactic prose, rather than the style employed in the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels or in the appeals and argumentation of Paul. Secondly, the style of the catholic epistles is strikingly similar to that of later Christian literature. The apostolic and later fathers of the church write in a style which recalls that of James and the letters of Peter. The roots of this linguistic style lie in the edifying language of the hellenized diaspora synagogue; this is why one could call the Greek of the synagogue a biblical or Jewish Greek, although one must be aware that the biblical-Jewish element is restricted exclusively to phraseology and sentence-construction, whereas the phonology, standard forms, normal syntax, formation of words, and most of the meanings of words follow standard koiné. During the imperial age, the semitic influence on the language of Christian theologians gradually disappeared. The influence of the LXX was restricted to allusions and direct quotations. Nevertheless, the basic linguistic tone of the earliest church never fell completely silent.


IV. Dogmatics

1. Bible and dogmatics. Every aspect of the Christian faith and life is constituently related to the Bible. It is the task of the dogmatic study of the Bible to clarify its significance for the Christian faith and the Christian life, thus formulating criteria for appropriate ways of handling the Bible in the Christian church, ways in keeping with the Bible’s significance. For dogmatics, the intellectual exposition of the truth of the Christian faith in church doctrine, the Bible is relevant above all in two ways: as a witness to the origin of the Christian faith, the gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s salvation for the world; and as witness to the truth of the Christian faith, a truth based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This double relationship to the Bible finds expression in